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LATIN IN THE GRADES AGAIN

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One day last spring a teacher stopped me in the hall and asked, "What do you think about this Latin in the grades? What is your honest opinion?" Viewing the ground cautiously and seeing no reason why the opinion I expressed should not be honest, I replied, "For every pupil, no; for the pupil with average ability, probably yes; for the pupil with ability above the average, decidedly yes."

But this involves a division of the pupils into the more and less favored, and here objections are raised. One teacher remarks, "Personally I do not like the system of dividing the pupils and letting the bright ones take English with the Latin grammar. It takes the good pupils out of my class and makes the class very uninteresting." Another teacher, looking at it less personally, says, "I do not approve of separating the pupils. The duller children need the inspiration that comes from having the bright ones in the class." If we are to be personal about the matter, how far are you willing to have your bright child used as material for making the class interesting for the teacher or inspiring for the dull pupils? Moreover, if we have in mind merely the advantage of the duller child, there is an influence as likely to cause humiliation and discouragement as inspiration and help. After dividing a class in which there were marked contrasts, I found that the pupils in the slower section began at once to do better work. One little girl said, with real joy, "I can do better work now; but in that other class I was always fussed." Is it right, however, to decide the question thinking only of the advantage of the duller pupil? Even suppose the bright boy is an inspiration to the dull one, what is the effect of the dull boy on the bright one? He becomes bored, careless, and conceited. He is acquiring habits of inattention, disastrous for all his future life. He is losing time and ability, and the

world is losing him. We give special equipment, special teachers, special fresh air, to our sick and subnormal. It is true that many schools now are allowing the brighter pupil to advance more rapidly. The time may even come when some expense may be given to equipment and instruction for them, and the community will find it a paying investment.

In giving my honest opinion, I said that the average pupil should probably take Latin. This depends upon the conditions under which the class is formed. In the case of foreign children who hear poor English or none at home, it is a question whether at this stage in their school life they can afford to give any time to a foreign language. The decision should be governed by the nature of the class work. Even the child with no foundation in English may gain a great deal from the study of Latin-English grammar, but for him the subject of English composition, written and oral, must be amply provided for in another class. There is room for doubt, or rather no room for doubt or for anything else, when the teacher must teach, in the same class with Latin and English grammar, the subjects of English composition, oral expression, spelling, English literature, penmanship, and vocational guidance.

If Latin and English are to be taught together there is no doubt that the right time to begin is in 7-1. The work in Latin should keep one step in advance of the English. The same nomenclature should be used, and the newer English should be illustrated by the older Latin, the logical and helpful method. Under favorable conditions the two years in the grades should enable the pupils to cover the work of the first year in high school. There are many points where useful correlation between Latin and English will be lost if less than this amount of Latin is covered.

The question is sometimes asked, "What can be done to keep the children interested?" My answer is, "Teach them Latin." No stimulants, no moving-pictures are needed here to keep interest awake. I do not know why it is, but children do find just plain Latin interesting. If their neglect or my conscience leads me for a time to drop Latin entirely in favor of the English grammar, they consider it a punishment and inquire eagerly when they may have Latin again. Some devices, however, may be noted. The pupils

enjoy learning quotations, and we try to select those that are well known or those that involve some new form or construction. We have had the pupils collect pictures illustrating life in ancient Italy, or some story in history or mythology. These are pasted on large cards and labeled in good simple Latin. We spell down on vocabulary, inflections, and quotations. The pupils' names are translated into Latin and written on cards; on another set of cards are Latin questions about the quotations or inflections. The pupils select a teacher and with these cards they can conduct a very creditable Latin school by themselves. Unexpected exclamations and questions in Latin always rouse a class to a wide-awake enthusiasm. But it is a task of unlimited patience to get answers that are in any way accurate. Glibness, rapidity, inaccuracy, are the besetting sins. If conversation in Latin helps to overcome these it is wise, otherwise not.

Several times we have given a play selected from *Decem Fabulae*. It is needless to say that the pupils are wildly enthusiastic about such an exercise. The rising generation would rather act than eat. If the study of a play can be so arranged that it contributes something of value to every member of the class, it should form a part of the semester's program. There is a temptation sometimes to place too much emphasis upon material things, pictures, models, dolls, to be handled and exhibited. These things are no doubt interesting, and of some value in themselves, but I am inclined to think that we are tempted today to put too much stress upon them. In the higher grades, where the Latin is an old story, perhaps these stimulants are needed, perhaps they are wise. But in the grades they are not needed as yet; the interest in Latin comes from the subject itself. Do let us keep this interest where it belongs; do let the pupils in this class use their brains and learn to keep their hands still.

One of the common arguments in favor of Latin in the grades is the statement that young children memorize easily. They certainly do it reluctantly. The average child of today can learn readily when he pays attention and applies his mind to the simple task before him; but, oh, how he hates to pay attention and apply his mind to a simple task! Yet these children like high marks, and consider it no disgrace to be on the honor roll. They still recognize

the actual school work as a legitimate part of the day's program, and the teachers are recognized as the legitimate guides in this work, not simply tolerated but even admired and respected, according to the present standards of respect. They would be strangely out of place in Lacedaemon, the honored home of the aged, and they would wonder what the Athenians were applauding. Yet their attitude is not objectionable; they admit us on terms of perfect equality, to be talked with, joked with, and corrected, especially corrected.

It has been my good fortune during the past five years to be associated with a certain keen and sympathetic session-room teacher. More than once she has said to me, "The pupils in the Latin class do have a manner quite unlike the manner of the other pupils in my room." I say, "They are the better pupils." But she insists, "That is not all; there is something they get in that training that leads to dignity and a state of mind that is carried on into other subjects and into their general behavior in the room." What is this influence? The children come from the sixth grade with no experience in attacking a difficult subject; they find in Latin a subject that appeals to them because it is different from anything that they have studied before. While it is difficult enough to exercise their minds it is not confusing and discouraging; it is not as difficult to understand as English grammar.

The children come to class bubbling and sputtering with eagerness to make themselves heard; not so much to recite as to tell someone else how to recite, to forestall my correction of John's mistake, or better still to tell me my mistakes. I know I have been criticized for expecting in the seventh grade that degree of decorum which I find in the high school. I might say that even that degree is not alarming. If these children are allowed to conduct their life *sua sponte*, I should never make my voice heard, we should simply revolve in a merry-go-round. The audacity of these young people amazes me every day. They hesitate at nothing, they are ready to discuss anything. Even the versatile Archias would envy them; for they too are able to give a great number of most excellent sentences extemporaneously; but unfortunately they write nothing *accurate cogitateque*. Everyone is eager to be called to the front to

read his theme. Everyone is eager to show the reader's mistakes and the reader is as ready to defend himself. Here is a splendid ability and a splendid force to harness and guide but, oh, "where can accuracy be found and where is the place of understanding?" Try to insist on a few rules and definitions in English or Latin. It is the work of days or even weeks to get these firmly fixed in mind. The children are far more concerned with the form of the work than the content. A written exercise satisfies them, for it is something tangible; but the correctness of this is not an important matter. They want results with no effort. They cannot learn that effervescing is not reciting. What has all this to do with Latin in the grades? I do believe that Latin taken at just this impatient, restless period in the child's development is a means toward leading him to better habits. It is a subject which is hard and yet not puzzling; it is interesting and not flippant; its value is not connected with material things; it serves to illuminate English grammar. The pupil is more willing to work hard on Latin than on English which he wrongly believes he knows because it is the tongue that he speaks. This hard work is usually the first that he has met in all his short life, and the experience may save him some disastrous shock in his first semester in high school. The work helps him learn habits of concentration, and the exactness of the language enables him to see results when he does try to be accurate. May we not believe that in the splendid language of Virgil there is something great and charming that holds these children and that gives them, as my friend believes, an added dignity and a respect for scholarship? something that makes their minds more clear, steady, and serene?

When the pupils have completed three or four semesters' work I am in the habit of asking them their opinion, their honest opinion, about the work. Some allowance ought to be made in view of their inclination to write what they have heard or what they think I wish to hear. Children of this age, however, are more spontaneous than they will be five years later; they are less inclined to a generous or cautious consideration of my feelings. Here are some of their remarks.

"I used to think that in learning a language you just had to learn words. Now I see that there is more to English than I ever thought there could be before this semester."

"Good Latin students are usually the people higher up in life and they are looked up to by others as wise men. If every business man who has to deal with foreign countries would study Latin, we would have a country filled with great men, and many embarrassing mistakes would be avoided."

"Studying Latin has been excellent discipline for me; I used to pay attention about one-half the time, but now I don't miss anything if I can help it. Paying attention has also raised my standing from F to G. I am glad that I reformed as my mother and father do not like F's and I wanted to get my name on the honor list. I know that I am ready to reason nearly twice as well as I could before taking Latin, and I think it helps me understand some hard points in my other studies."

"I have learned more English in the last two semesters than in all the others put together, and I have went to five different schools."

"This semester's work has been very hard for me to digest but I have gone through it all quite prosperously. Where there is a will there is a way. I am sure I have been taught much more common sense than anything else this semester."

"Latin is a subject that I do not care about. To me it is like medicine. I do not like it but it does help me in my other studies, and I think that every child that has a chance to take Latin ought to."

"Latin is a language that requires a great deal of study, which not only gives one the knowledge of Latin but also develops the mind. Latin has taught me to study without looking up every time anyone comes in or goes out of the room; and Latin being so hard has made me study harder, not only in English but also in all my other studies."

"We do not learn as much as we ought because the teacher has to spend so much time teaching us parts of speech which we ought to know. I think she teaches us the best she knows how, but—"

And that sentence was never finished.